



PROJECT MUSE®

As Others See Us: Dismantling Stereotypes of Appalachian  
Class Systems in Sarah Barnwell Elliott's *The Durket  
Sperret*

Erin Houlihan Wedehase

Mississippi Quarterly, Volume 67, Number 4, Fall 2014, pp. 559-580 (Article)

Mississippi  
Quarterly

The Journal  
Of Southern Cultures



Edited by Barry Hankins, Wilson Perle,  
Meredith Reardon, Sarah Barnwell Elliott,  
Mark Twain and Charles Peckinpah, and  
an Advisory Board of Editors

Vol. 67, No. 4 Fall 2014

Published by Johns Hopkins University Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/mss.2014.0030>

➔ For additional information about this article

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/740827/summary>

ERIN HOULIHAN WEDEHASE  
Wake Technical Community College

## As Others See Us: Dismantling Stereotypes of Appalachian Class Systems in Sarah Barnwell Elliott's *The Durket Sperret*

IN 1904, *HARPER'S MONTHLY MAGAZINE* PUBLISHED AN ESSAY ABOUT Appalachia's folk music, explaining that this "peculiar" music comes from the mountaineer who "is fond of turning the joke on himself. He makes fun of his own poverty, his own shiftlessness, his ignorance, his hard luck, and his crimes" (Miles 118). The impoverished mountaineer is a character unique to Appalachian literature, but the stereotype of the rural poor abounds throughout nineteenth-century regionalism. The lower-class figure is so pervasive in regionalist texts that scholars often call a character "regional" when they really mean "working class" (Palmer 9). If critics do see multiple classes in regions, they often assume those groups to be categorically fixed. According to Stephanie Foote, late nineteenth-century regionalist literature advocated "an idealized rural life, in which traditional virtues always obtained, and in which its citizens *knew their place*, and knew the place of their compatriots" (29, emphasis added). Assuming that regional characters are either homogeneously impoverished or fixed in their class categories, scholars mistakenly read the genre as void of class conflict, resulting in little scholarly attention to regional class systems (Dainotto 25).

Through analysis of Sarah Barnwell Elliott's novel *The Durket Sperret* (1898), this article calls for renewed attention to the intricacies of class in regional spaces, especially within the context of Appalachian literature. Contemporary Appalachian studies scholars such as Harry M. Caudill, Dwight Billings, Kathleen Blee, and Henry Shapiro are working to establish more nuanced understandings of Appalachia's complex economies, but Elliott's text problematized reductive visions of class in Appalachia as early as the nineteenth century. Unlike other local colorists from this era who ignored the relative and mutable nature of local class systems, Elliott distinguished herself by revealing regional socioeconomic ambiguity. Even though her novel focuses on destabilizing monolithic

stereotypes about Appalachian economies, recovery of her writing could benefit all scholars who seek a deeper understanding of regional economies. The text reminds its readers that one's geographic placement is not a reliable indicator of class status since humans are relatively mobile. Moreover, Elliott's novel shows that we cannot assume that regions are isolated from economic development.

My analysis of *The Durket Sperret* focuses on the characters' many physical relocations that render their class status unclear and expose the unsettled social groupings of Tennessee's Cumberland Mountains. As opposed to universal poverty or the stringent class divides turn-of-the-century readers expected to see, social standings in the novel become unfixed when the characters travel. *The Durket Sperret* centers on the movement of Hannah Warren, a young girl whose family has fallen on hard times after her father's death. Despite living in poverty, Hannah's grandmother refuses to let the family forget its elite heritage and demands that Hannah marry well. Hannah thwarts her grandmother's agenda by leaving home. This mobility illustrates her independence, but more importantly, establishes the countryside as a site of economic ambiguity by altering how others view Hannah's social status and by revising her view of other characters' socioeconomic positions. Hannah's first major relocation occurs when she treks from her home in the Lost Cove to the university town of Sewanee, where she peddles goods for financial survival so she will not have to marry the affluent but cruel and violent Si Durket. In Sewanee, she also meets the wealthy Agnes Welling and Max Dudley, two university residents who treat Hannah as an experiment in the civilization of the lower classes. As the novel progresses, Hannah ventures between the two spaces multiple times, journeys outside of her family's cove to a funeral, and meanders through Sewanee with Agnes's followers. While spatial positioning shapes a character's class status, physical mobility ensures that this state will remain in flux. As Hannah says when she is forced to walk with Si, "If there's a bad place in the road, pick up yours foot an' cross it quick . . . thar' ain't no use in doubtin'—git over" (40). Social and physical mobility collide in Elliott's novel when characters relocate to improve bad financial situations.

### Elliott's Varied Socioeconomic Positions

Despite her masterful depictions of Appalachia's multiple classes, Elliott's work still suffers critical neglect. To date, scholarship consists of only a handful of articles about her writing and one major biography, published by Clara Childs Mackenzie in 1980.<sup>1</sup> One possible explanation for the lack of critical attention could be that almost all of Elliott's writings have gone out of print. In 1915, her publisher, Henry Holt & Company, destroyed all of the plates of her work (Mackenzie, *Sarah* Preface, n.p.).<sup>2</sup> However, the lack of scholarly attention could also result from uncertainty about Elliott as a regionalist since she complicated assumptions many held about inhabitants of Appalachian communities. One might expect Elliott, as a resident of a regional community, to be lower-class like many of the characters emerging from late nineteenth-century local color texts about the region. However, the author experienced both wealth and poverty, a dual existence that provided a unique vantage point from which to explore class divides.

Elliott was born into a well-off family of planters whose lineage dated back to the settlement of the Southern colonies (Mackenzie, *Sarah* 16). Despite this familial wealth, she also experienced destitution firsthand when her father lost a great deal of money trying to open a girls' school in Georgia (22-23). Her family had to survive on handouts from relatives after this failed venture, but they maintained a genteel poverty that always ensured access to books and music (26). After her father's death, Elliott experienced still more penury, living with relatives until joining her brother in Tennessee (Mackenzie, Introduction ix). The publication of *Jerry* (1891) brought Elliott some financial stability, but prior to this success her frugal existence meant rarely having more than one hundred dollars in her bank account at a time (Mackenzie, *Sarah* 44). Elliott frequently wrote on the front and back of paper to save money and the family even took in boarders to generate extra income (34).

Elliott's class status became more complex with her success as a writer. Unlike many of the literary elite, Elliott wrote for money (Moses

---

<sup>1</sup>For shorter biographical articles on Elliott, see Kunitz; Willingham; Williams; Ballard and Hudson; and Ensor.

<sup>2</sup>Some reprints of Elliott's work do exist, including a 1969 collection of short stories and Dodo Press's restoration of *The Durket Sperret*. Digital archives such as the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill's *Documenting the American South* have also made her work more accessible.

50). Still, she still moved among the privileged intelligentsia thanks to her connections with the University of Sewanee, which her father helped found (Mackenzie, Introduction viii). Her home near the school became a gathering site for many university scholars and writers; by 1897, she had become such a successful author that *The Literary World* noted her move to New York in its “Personalia” section. Like her characters, Elliott altered her social status by relocating and her move north allowed her to interact with the socially elite. While there, she attended lectures, frequented theaters, joined social clubs, and encountered other literary greats such as William Dean Howells, Thomas Nelson Page, and Charles Dudley Warner (Mackenzie, *Sarah* 47). Associating with these individuals (especially Warner, who had his finger on the pulse of Gilded Age economics) would have made her very aware of late nineteenth-century class divides. Unlike *The Durket Sperret*’s characters, who stay relatively local, Elliott traveled internationally to Jerusalem and Italy. She detailed these experiences in a series about Americans abroad that *The Independent* published from March 1887 to July 1888. Many of these texts, such as “A Florentine Idyl,” reveal an early interest in problematizing class categories. In this story, a young woman arrives at an expatriate community in Italy. The residents regret snubbing her for traveling without a maid when they realize that, as the daughter of a South American mining mogul, she must travel incognito. The woman’s transformation from lower-class status to wealthy in the eyes of the Florentine pensioners foreshadows the fluidity of class exhibited in *The Durket Sperret*.

### **Elliott’s Distinction from Other Local Colorists**

Elliott’s depictions of class systems turn from international to regional in *John Paget* (1893), which illustrates the poverty of New York City slums. She later focuses on her native South in stories such as “Faith and Faithfulness” (1896), which depicts the complexity of postbellum social categories. In this story, the formerly wealthy Miss Maria leaves the ravaged South and must become the caretaker of her previous slave’s children while Kizzy, the ex-slave, becomes the independent wage earner. Unlike Thomas Nelson Page and Thomas Dixon, Southern writers who idealize the racially inflected social hierarchies of the Old South, Elliott explores the economic complexity of the New South’s social order (Mackenzie, *Sarah* 19). While her Reconstruction texts

rework the strict antebellum class divides that Page and Dixon uphold, her Appalachian writings show another level of complexity in dismantling assumptions about regional economies. Elliott's Appalachian texts first have to establish that multiple classes *exist*, a difficult task given the prevailing beliefs about the region's universal poverty that other authors perpetuated.

The writing of local colorists such as Mary Noailles Murfree, James Lane Allen, and John Fox, Jr., supports two main myths about the region and its people. First, the writers depicted Appalachians as "a rude, backward, romantic, and sometimes violent race who had quietly lived for generations in isolation from the mainstream of American life" (Eller xvi). As a result of this perceived separation from the larger society, the second myth of Appalachia developed—the myth of its ostensibly universal poverty and lack of cultural development, resulting from its inability to interact with larger systems of industry and commerce. Emphasizing the region's isolation and subsequent financial distress, Allen wrote in an article for *Harper's* that the mountaineers were

Living to-day [sic] as their forefathers lived before them a hundred years ago; hearing little of the world, caring nothing for it; responding feebly to the influences of civilization near the highways of travel in and around the towns . . . [they are] utterly lacking the spirit of development from within. . . . most of the people are abjectly poor, and they appear to have no sense of accumulation. (261-62)

Similarly, Fox's *A Cumberland Vendetta* (1895) and Murfree's *In the Tennessee Mountains* (1884) reinforce stereotypical images of uncivilized, impoverished Appalachians such as feuding clans, moonshiners, and grizzled old women worn out from childbirth and hardship. Conversely, one critic observed *The Durket Sperret's* distinction from other "mountain life" novels, pointing out that it "doesn't contain a single moonshiner," but instead puts the "mountain heroine in contact with the refined people of a University town" ("Article 7"). Another reviewer noted that "the realism of the story, and the absolute understanding of the inner nature of the mountain folk it deals with, are remarkable" ("The Durket Family Pride" 576). Critics distinguished Elliott from other local colorists because of her unprecedented attempt to portray the multiple class systems of Appalachia as realistically as possible.

### Theorizing Class

According to Amy Lang, most Americans know that class has something to do with wealth and privilege, but generally lack the vocabulary to talk about “its injuries and its struggles” (6). *The Durket Sperret* shows that class in Appalachia is not any simpler to define than it is in the larger nation, thus destabilizing the region’s theoretical economic separation. In the novel, class becomes a tangled web of meaning based on one’s heritage, ownership of goods, and access to leisure and education. These multiple ways of designating class belonging yield a social system in which characters often occupy multiple socioeconomic stations and move frequently between classes.

Out of the many ways that characters establish class, pedigree is perhaps the most obvious. Hannah’s grandmother, Mrs. Warren, bases her upper-class status entirely on her ancestry: “The Warrens and the Durkets stood on the same social level, and as the two aristocratic lines met in Mrs. John Warren, she was regarded as a very important person” (58). The high-class, graceful manner in which Hannah serves Agnes’s friends also illustrates a “blood [that] might have been very blue in ages past” as well as her “hereditary right to her simple dignity and beauty” (96). When the protagonist brings in the hogs and milks the cows, we see that she possesses the elite “class habit” of quietness (3). The narrator then affirms that Hannah possesses this trait because “the Warrens had always been well-to-do” (3). Ironically, the lower-class acts of milking cows and bringing in hogs reveal this upper-class characteristic.

The novel refuses to define class by either background or current economic state, complicating the classification system further by presenting commodity ownership as another socioeconomic marker. Hannah’s family originally presided over the Cove as members of the wealthy land-owning class. When Hannah’s father dies, they lose much of their land and become lower class. Their possession of goods such as “bacon, and apples, and potatoes that could be sold,” however, secures a class status above dire destitution. Hannah considers herself part of the bourgeoisie because she has the capital necessary for peddling: “coffee and the sugar, besides two dollars toward the plowing, and three bushels of apples engaged, making five dollars—to her a fortune” (21). Relative to how much she owned before peddling, Hannah is now (at least in her mind) wealthy. The Covites do not care about the quality of the goods owned as long as they have enough, which surprises the university

student, Max. He becomes confused when Hannah distinguishes herself from the “poor” sharecropper, Mrs. Wilson (19). To Max, both women live in poverty since they are inhabitants of the economically ravaged Cove. Max concludes that Hannah defines wealth as “quantity . . . in her world the rich demanded no better quality, only a greater quantity, and, after a certain stage of plentifulness was reached, life was taken with folded hands” (19).

Ownership of commodities in the Cove can elevate class status, but this upward mobility often depends on how one earns goods and interacts with market systems. Hannah’s middle-class status, designated through her ownership of farm products, becomes compromised by the demeaning act of selling goods door-to-door. Not having to rely on outside commerce represents the best type of commodity ownership. Initially, the Warrens were well-off because they acquired basic necessities without having to depend on outsiders, “making at home almost everything they needed” (3). Contemporary readers might not see wearing homespun and eating homemade butter as a sign of wealth, but to the Covites, these actions meant financial stability and economic independence from an unstable market.

The Sewanee residents’ ownership of vast amounts of china and rich carpets might make them seem wealthy to many of the Covites. Ironically, they are also desperate for the goods that the lower-class Covites have in abundance, complicating the simple formula that whoever owns the most expensive goods is automatically the best off socially and economically. Lizer Wilson notes the Sewanee residents’ dependency, saying that “they don’t know no better than to tuck frostbit ’taters . . . and they’ll give most anything fur butter jest now. . . . To tell the truth, thar ain’t much o’ *anything* to eat right now. . . . these ’versity women is jest pestered to git sumpen fur the boys” (11).

The novel further problematizes the equation of commodity ownership with an elite social status through the character Si Durket. Si has more money and land than the other Covites; on the surface this makes him upper class. Yet, even with all his bravado about drinking the most expensive liquor, Hannah sees her cousin as beneath her (41). Despite possessing luxury goods, he lacks social standing due to his violent and dishonest actions. Dock Wilson, Hannah’s farmhand, on the contrary, represents the lowest class in the novel—the subsistence farmer. While poor, he is not the uncivilized, primitive moonshiner that other local colorists depict. His strong work ethic and loyalty to Hannah establish



him as a textual foil to Si and position him as more socially deserving of Hannah's hand in marriage, even over the elite Max Cartright.

Max Cartright and Agnes Welling occupy a privileged social position because of their material wealth, but also because of their access to education and leisure time. Many of Elliott's readers who anticipated depictions of impoverished mountaineers would have been surprised to read about Appalachians such as the educated, financially secure Max and Agnes. They might not have known that the region (like other developed Southern towns) was actually home to many wealthy families who had the power and influence to provide their descendants with educational opportunities (Eller 11). Nineteenth-century Tennessee in particular drew many of the economically privileged to its universities: Terrill College in Decherd; Mary Sharp College in Winchester; and of course, the University of the South at Sewanee (Smith).

The characters' spoken dialect represents their varied access to education. One reviewer observed that *The Durket Sperret* "does not lead one into the labyrinth of dialect one is led at the outset to expect" ("The Durket Family Pride" 576). Readers familiar with Appalachian literature in the vein of Fox, Allen, and Murfree would have wanted to see dialect-heavy prose. Instead, Elliott makes all of her characters appear less isolated from mainstream America by using minimal phonetic variations in dialect that is not quite Standard English, but is still recognizable to non-Appalachians. Cratis Williams argues that the Covites' use of dialect illustrates their isolation from education and university life (52). Yet, as with access to goods and an inherited gentility, one's ability to use or not use dialect does not always equate to class status. For example, while Max scoffs at Hannah's accent, sarcastically observing how "the way in which she said 'taters' was lovely," Hannah's soft, fluid accent actually attracts Agnes (17). This attraction later fuels Agnes's desire to elevate Hannah's class status. Furthermore, sometimes the possession of an authentic language instead of affected "proper" speech can delineate upper-class status. Hannah's grandmother privileges the protagonist's dialect over another relative's attempt to imitate genteel speech patterns: "When she [Hannah] talks she says hit out like the best kinder folks is usin' to hear hit said, an' don't keep on a-whistlin' hit liker pattridge in the springtime" (64). Hannah's refusal to abandon her Appalachian dialect signifies her access to "the best kinder folks," at least in her grandmother's eyes.

Some of Appalachia's turn-of-the-century residents spoke Standard English and had access to education, but the region also had inhabitants who exhibited wealth and privilege through what Thorstein Veblen calls "conspicuous leisure." Published just one year after *The Durket Sperret*, Veblen's *The Theory of the Leisure Class* (1899) says that the wealthy exhibit their elite social status through the "conspicuous abstention from labour" or having no need to work (ch. 3). Unlike Hannah, the wealthy Sewanee residents do not have to peddle goods; they spend their days contemplating poetry, philosophy, and dwelling in the "high tree-tops of culture" (49).

Typically, the ability to travel is a form of leisure that signals wealth and social standing. The figure of the wealthy traveler often enters regional texts as a cultural outsider (Palmer 3). *The Durket Sperret* resists this trope, however, when natives of Tennessee become travelers themselves. Hannah's grandmother notes that Si Durket has ventured as far as Chattanooga. Additionally, the narrator describes the privileged guests at the funeral of Mrs. Warren's brother: "The Budds would be there: not as rich as the Durkets, but more traveled, for they had been . . . to Nashville and Chattanooga. . . . Thus, although without the blood of the Durkets, the Budds had achieved a position that in some respects rivaled theirs" (58). In the Cumberland Mountains, travel means social status, but as with many of the other qualifiers of class, this system is not absolute. Elliott's novel often refuses the connection between physical mobility and affluence. Although Si has traveled outside of the Cove, his alcoholism and violent tendencies undermine his social status. Elliott even goes so far as to make the Budds' travel ironic; in the larger world, Chattanooga is relatively close to their home in the Cumberland Mountains. They do not know that the truly wealthy exhibit luxury by *not* traveling, as Agnes demonstrates when she spends most of her time indoors reading and debating philosophical ideas.

Even though the novel pokes fun at the "well-traveled" Budds, its depiction of vacationers documents the large number of elite Appalachians who had the wealth and free time to travel to the region's more exotic locations. Many ventured to the hot springs of western North Carolina and Virginia, not so much for their health benefits, but to connect with other aristocrats (Drake 136). Even Mary Noailles Murfee summered at Beersheba Springs in Grundy County, Tennessee (Drake 138). By depicting travelers, the novel brings this relatively unknown crowd of Appalachians to light for readers who expected to see a more stereotypical

poverty. Instead, they witness a world where class is relative and mutable.

### **Class Relativity**

By text's end, readers are unsure about how to define class and even less sure about which classes the characters occupy. Because the region's ways of distinguishing class categories are so fluid, the characters often gauge socioeconomic status by considering themselves in relation to other Appalachians. Their mobility through different parts of the region reveals how others live and these revelations help the travelers reassess their own class membership. As long as characters stay in one place, according to Max, they might not understand economic differences. Developing his metaphor about how the Covites live as unrefined "moles" in comparison to the Sewanee residents who live as tree-top-dwelling "squirrels," Max observes, "What difference does it make to the mole so long as he does not know what it is to be a squirrel? . . . If I were a mole, I hope that I should . . . burrow diligently into the best potato-patch I could find" (49). Max knows that to travel means exposure to different class categories and this could mean a newfound dissatisfaction with one's social status. Hannah's grandfather sees class relativity as slightly more complex: "An' folks what seen fur tuck to fine wittles; an' folks what never seen fur was satisfy alonger bacon. But . . . hit seems they gits mixed up somehow" (98). Traveling can expose someone to different class qualities, but it is not always clear how altering one's status leads to increased or decreased satisfaction. Nor is it clear that divisions between people who eat "fine wittles" or "bacon" actually exist. In Hannah's case, traveling helps her see how she occupies both class positions.

Hannah's mobility means that she must constantly revise her own class status after witnessing the university students' privilege. The narrator observes that the realization that "people lived who thought themselves better than the Warrens or Durkets was a new sensation to Hannah" (12). Next to Agnes, Hannah views her class position in a new light: "her thoughts wandered off to Agnes Welling—so fair and delicate. . . . A sense of coarseness came over her. She was like the clods her plow turned: she was clumsy, like her own heavy shoes that she had silently compared with Agnes' dainty slipper" (55). Even worse than not

being wealthy, Hannah now realizes that in the eyes of this new upper class, she is actually poor (12).

By traveling with Lizer Wilson, a life-long peddler, Hannah realizes quickly that class can change depending on one's social circle. When a lower-class woman from the same cove catches Hannah selling goods with Mrs. Wilson, Hannah feels great shame knowing that she has fallen to this level (12). Hannah's grandmother expounds on the social ramifications of this new association: "When you is done rubbin' gainst the pot, thar ain't no use a-fearing smut. . . . Hannah Warren is done knowed fur a peddler alonger Lizer Wilson an' sich" (34). A character's associates can also elevate his or her socioeconomic status. Hannah's grandmother brags about her granddaughter's travels to Sewanee which enable the girl to mingle with the upper class. When Mrs. Warren's nemesis, Minervy Budd, scorns Hannah's peddling, the grandmother retorts, "you'd peddle day and night, Minervy Budd, to get to know them folks to Sewanee. . . . them folks come from fur places, an' knows what's what, an' seen thet Hannah Warren air the right sort" (65). Although Hannah must sell items door-to-door, Matilda Warren views the act as worthwhile if it means associating with the social elite.

Due to Elliott's interest in reducing women's economic dependency, it is not surprising that class in *The Durket Sperret* also becomes relative to marital status. Refusing to accept Si's hand likens Hannah to Elliott, who at age twenty-two vowed to "sneer matrimony down" ("Letter"). The author's other texts, such as "Fortune's Vassals" (1899) and *The Making of Jane* (1901), argue for the New Woman's right to seek a career and self-fulfillment outside of the home. Initially, peddling instead of marrying Si allows Hannah to take control of her own fiscal well-being, anticipating Elliott's subsequent, financially independent heroines. Later, however, the novel reinforces women's economic dependency on their spouses when the narrator hints that Hannah can afford to sustain her family only because her future husband, Dock, becomes the family's farmhand (38). Furthermore, Hannah's loss of her job as a result of a rumored liaison with Max makes class absolutely relative to gendered relationships. Agnes sees Hannah as a threat and refuses to keep her on as a domestic servant, thus forcing the girl to face the economic stress of unemployment.

Although *The Durket Sperret* is somewhat ambiguous about whether or not women can control their class status free of gender constraints, the novel does resist the gendered divide between the home and the

public sphere. In one sense, this blurring of spaces exemplifies Elliott's desire to see women working outside of the home and in another sense affirms that spatial affiliations do not always designate class status. The domestic and the economic first mix when Hannah leaves Lost Cove to peddle in Sewanee. She journeys physically from her home to earn money, initially reinstating the division between the home and the market; however, she does so only to take care of her family, a domestic responsibility. When Hannah arrives with goods to sell at Agnes's house, Max asserts that "she seemed quite at home" (17). Max's observation could mean that Hannah's elite characteristics facilitate interaction with the upper class. Or, it might mean that Hannah is at "home" selling goods, thus uniting the comfort of the domestic sphere with the unfamiliarity of the market space.

Hannah's domestic servitude further troubles economic categories based on space when she retains refined mannerisms despite working outside the home. Historically, home represented "refuge from the exigencies of the market-world" (Lang 12), and in the nineteenth century, people defined the middle-class woman by her ability to follow "the sexual division of labor" (Aron 180), which meant working in this "refuge." "Women who needed to earn wages to help support their families. . . . failed to meet middle-class standards," according to Cindy S. Aron (180). However, Hannah still displays signs of her prior class status when she recoils at being called a peddler like Lizer Wilson. For Hannah, the home and the market intermingle, meaning that she is not necessarily lower class because she has to work outside of the home nor upper class because she learns quickly how to negotiate the privileged Sewanee economy. By collapsing the arbitrary divide between private space and public market, the novel destabilizes the myth that specific locations can reliably indicate socioeconomic positioning or exist in economic isolation. *The Durket Sperret* thus thwarts the notion that regions such as Appalachia (as macrocosms of the home) are self-contained in their economies or resistant to outside, larger market systems.

### **Class Mutability**

Because the novel presents class designations as relative, the characters' socioeconomic positions are constantly reassigned based on whom they encounter through their mobility. Elliott's work distinguishes

itself from other turn-of-the-century Appalachian local color pieces by presenting class systems that are unstable not only in definition, but also in composition when the characters occupy multiple classes over the course of the novel, sometimes simultaneously. From the outset, the novel depicts class mutability in Hannah's family: "the winter had been hard, and for the first time the Warrens had felt themselves poor" (2). *The Durket Sperret* presents class mutability through two lenses: first, Hannah's mobility modifies how she conceptualizes the class of other Appalachians; second, her travels change how others categorize Hannah's socioeconomic status.

The first character who changes class status in the novel (at least in Hannah's eyes) is Mrs. Wilson. Initially, Lost Cove residents look upon Lizer Wilson as poor simply because she peddles goods. She has to labor for her income while paying deference to others—unlike Hannah's family, which is poor but self-sustaining. Nonetheless, although Hannah hates to admit it, in another sense Lizer Wilson occupies a higher class because she has the mobility and knowledge necessary to sell goods in Sewanee. Hannah must swallow her pride and defer to Lizer's authority because she "knew the ways at the University and could direct a beginner [peddler]" (4). Lizer's negotiation of Sewanee's door-to-door sales market reveals a mobility that corresponds to increased social standing in the Cove community, at least in terms of making money. Mrs. Wilson's occupation renders her simultaneously upper class and lower class, blurring absolute socioeconomic boundaries in this region.

Hannah's perception of people's class also changes after she travels to Sewanee and meets the university residents. Hannah's grandparents tell her that Sewanee's upper-class inhabitants are "darn fools, a-settin' round with books in their hands" (3). They are a wasteful group that does not know the value of money; they "bought everything and saved nothing . . . [and] were held throughout the country to be strangely 'lackin'" (3). Even with wealth, they occupy a lower social order than the thrifty, conscientious Covites and are a "little better than 'Naytrals'" according to Hannah's grandparents (16). In the eyes of the cove dwellers, the town's residents are so out of touch with their surroundings that they might as well be innocent, primitive creatures. During Hannah's trip to town, "she had looked into a new world, and her life seemed to have changed" (16). While there, she encounters luxuries that "she had never seen before, the covered floors that made no noise, the books, the curtains, the pictures, all were new to her, at least, in this

reckless profusion" (16). The university students' luxury goods are extensive and "Hannah saw so much china and glass that she wondered if they kept it for sale" (16). At first, these material goods affirm Hannah's perception of the town's residents as wasteful and opulent, but after chatting with the owners of these luxuries, "all the fear of Sewanee had gone" (21). Instead of seeing the town folks as threatening, Hannah becomes intoxicated with their love of high-quality goods. Her negative perception dissolves when she sees them less as ignorant "Naytrals" and more as educated, refined consumers who value quality.

Mobility also changes how Hannah's fellow Appalachians categorize her. When she begins peddling, Mrs. Wilson exploits Hannah's background to sell the girl's wares. Lizer tells the buyers that Hannah "ain't peddled befo', an' ain't got no need to come now. . . . She jest come along fur comp'ny, an' bring a few things fur balance—she ain't pertickler 'bout sellin'" (14). According to Mrs. Wilson, Hannah lacks the desperation to reduce her goods' prices; as a member of the elite Covites, she does not constitute a "true" peddler. Ironically, Lizer Wilson notes Hannah's upper-class status only to facilitate a business transaction that the heroine desperately needs for economic survival. The true revision of Hannah's class status comes when Lizer Wilson no longer sees her companion as wealthy, but rather as someone who must feign elitism to sell apples. Hannah realizes that she has sunk to a new social low when she imagines people talking about "a Warren gal a-tradin' taters like any trash" (23). Others in Mrs. Wilson's class also reassess Hannah's gentility after seeing the girl peddle goods. When Hannah sees a fellow Covite working in the university houses, she "felt the woman's stare of wonder that 'John Warren's gal' should peddle with Lizer Wilson!" (13).

While the Covites now see Hannah as lower class after her trip to town, the Sewanee residents recognize her upper-class potential. Agnes tells Max, "I think a simple white frock and a big white hat would make her altogether beautiful; and the mole would not be 'up a tree,' but developed into an ideal squirrel, for it would have the cornbread training of the mole and the graces of the squirrel" (50). When Max's colleague warns Agnes about the ethical dangers of her experiment in civilizing the lower classes, Agnes responds by affirming that "the girl is a different creature already" (101). Agnes might be wrong to try to make Hannah over, but she is right about the girl's ability to change her class status quickly and occupy a hybridized socioeconomic position. After becoming a low-class peddler in the eyes of the Covites, Hannah rapidly regains

some of her lost social status when people see her traveling back to the Cove with Max. The observers notice how he lifts her off of her horse, a genteel maneuver that is not “the valley custom” (95). Hannah is oddly lower class as a lifetime Covite and upper class as one who practices the habits of a refined Sewanee resident. Her liminal class status is reinforced when she finds herself caught in the rain while carrying Agnes’s schoolbooks. Max accompanies her with his umbrella, marking her as a lower-class servant who walks as a member of the privileged society.

This seemingly insignificant act of mobility causes a social uproar. In the cove, “the young people who giggled together regarded her as ‘sot up,’” while “the old people, who wisely kept ‘a great gulf fixed’ between their class and the university men, looked disapprovingly” (106). Max’s colleagues chide him for treating his servant as a social equal. As a result of this controversy, Agnes feels that she has no choice but to dismiss Hannah (108). At this point, Hannah’s social status becomes lower than that of a servant—that of a woman with loose morals. To no avail, the protagonist defends her honor by attributing the rumors to Si’s jealous lies. Her grandfather responds, “Lies or no lies, everybody is a-talkin’ an’ Hannah Warren’s name is in the dirt. Thar’s no use a-tryin’ to hide thet; we must hide you” (110). Fortunately for Hannah, Max is well aware of the damage his friendship has caused and proposes to her, thus offering the possibility of an upper-class lifestyle. The heroine refuses his hand, choosing to stay with Dock rather than join an elite society that caused her so much pain. Even though Max laments “how pitiful that she did not stay in her own sphere!” (101), there is a bright side to Hannah’s fluid class designations. Hannah’s ability to navigate different socioeconomic groups refutes two myths about Appalachian society. First, her interactions with the social elite defy readers’ expectations to see Appalachia as a region of uniform poverty. Second, the class categories that are presented resist permanence, rendering Appalachian class systems as complex and nuanced as those within the larger nation.

### **Appalachia’s Many Economic Systems**

While reviewers applauded Elliott’s attempt to render a more complex Appalachia, it bears asking, did she intend for her writing to challenge reductive stereotypes of the culture? Discussing the novel’s publication, Elliott confesses, “I do not think that conscientiously I can claim any special purpose for *The Durket Sperret*. It came to me and so



I wrote it. Having lived most of my life at Sewanee, the people are well known to me” (“Comment” 657). Despite Elliott’s ambiguity about the purpose of her novel, readers might actually accuse her text of reinforcing turn-of-the-century stereotypes of Appalachians. It is hard not to see Hannah’s obstinate, wizened grandmother and her violent, feuding cousin as characters from a Murfree story. Even more troubling is Elliott’s 1898 article from the *Ladies’ Home Journal* entitled “A Race that Lives in Mountain Coves.” This essay describes the Covites as “squatters” who eek “out an existence by peddling either the nuts and fruits of the wilderness, or their very poor ‘gyarden truck”” (11). Despite their poverty, she concludes,

Slowly, but surely, these people are being civilized and bettered. Public schools have been introduced . . . and the women are consenting to hire themselves out as servants, thus learning and introducing into their own homes neater habits. They are less interesting as studies, perhaps, but they are more capable of appreciating higher and better things. (12)

This article positions Elliott as the elite Agnes who wants to “reform” Covites like Hannah. She writes not as someone in solidarity with the Covites, but as an outsider who reduces them to an uncivilized population.

However, a closer look reveals that Elliott’s self-positioning is not so simplistic.<sup>3</sup> While she hopes that the Covites express a willingness to learn from the “civilized” non-Covites, she also writes that “to be parlor-maids or nursemaids they think is degrading” (12). Inherent in the Cove dwellers’ prideful rejection of outside employment is a class system that renders them superior to the upper-class employers who rely on servant labor. Most importantly, the novel destabilizes the elite class’s civilizing capabilities by revealing Agnes’s hypocrisy as an agent of reform. In spite of her desire to elevate Hannah, she cruelly fires the girl

---

<sup>3</sup>To understand Elliott’s article, we must also consider the publishing context. The *Ladies’ Home Journal* was a magazine that “taught readers how to fashion and recognize themselves as white American women” (Foster 292). Given the source, Elliott might have exaggerated the exoticism of Appalachian culture in order to appeal to her readers’ need to claim a superior whiteness over the Appalachian Other. Additionally, having lived in the North and the South, Elliott knew her regional audiences. In the late nineteenth century, the South was not the most profitable “book-buying region.” Thus, Elliott may have depicted Appalachia as resistant to change in order to satisfy Northerners’ desire to see the South as undeveloped and backwards (Mackenzie, *Sarah* 57-58).

without investigating Si's rumors. She eliminates Hannah's exposure to upper-class society without a second thought. In contrast, Hannah rises from poor "mole" to royalty when she nobly declines Max's hand in marriage. Max reports the event to his friend: "the girl refused me. A princess could not have done it more grandly" (128). The pride that Elliott critiques in her article for the *Ladies' Home Journal* registers as a sign of refinement to Max. He observes this pride when Hannah becomes upset after overhearing the university students talk about "the dense ignorance of the 'Covites,' their lack of ambition, and . . . [the] hopelessness as to their future" (101). Readers see that Hannah is at least civilized enough to know when she is being insulted.

Elliott also juxtaposes Hannah's genuine refinement with Minervy Budd's feigned upper-class mannerisms. Minervy becomes the ideal Appalachian that the *Ladies' Home Journal* calls for with her desire to assimilate into the elite society. *The Durket Sperret's* readers see, however, that she is a fraud: she constantly puts on upper-class airs, flaunting her education and affecting an accent that she believes to sound genteel. Hannah does not need to associate with the wealthy to be happy. With her refusal of Max's hand, Hannah challenges her grandmother's desire to equate "the Durket sperret" with an elite heritage and instead makes it synonymous with independence from her grandmother's social and economic norms. Additionally, her decision to marry the farm hand, Dock Wilson, demonstrates that the traditional means of moving through class ranks by marrying up does not always suit a complex economic system like that of Lost Cove. This fluid economy that privileges choice in physical and social mobility changes too quickly for such an outdated system. Contrary to the readers' expectation to see the characters' economic agency as limited, Hannah actually demonstrates a great deal of control over her socioeconomic position.

Prior to publishing her novel as *The Durket Sperret*, Elliott significantly titled the work *As Others See Us* (Mackenzie, *Sarah* 98). While she might seem to write as an outsider, imposing her own New Woman, reformist agenda onto Appalachia, her use of the word "us" in the original title emphasizes her participation in the culture. The novel's first title addresses how others see Appalachia, but also corrects false assumptions about the region's uniform poverty and pervasive economic misfortune. A critic from *The Nation* disapproved of the text's refusal to perpetuate the images of Appalachia that America expected, lamenting

that “the description of the Warren homestead with its ‘lobby’ and ‘piazzas’ gives no clear vision of the style of architecture invariably in the Southern mountains. Nor do mottoes from Browning and Omar Khayyám seem the proper preluding for the rustic melodies which follow” (389). *The Durket Sperret* shows that Appalachia can indeed boast the refined, leisure culture of piazzas and poetry. It also harbors impoverished farmers and peddlers who work for a meager living. Most importantly, the text blurs the lines between such class divides, presenting lower-class workers like Hannah as genteel in their behaviors and upper-class urbanites like Agnes as “moles” who possess many goods but lack charm and poise. By depicting regional class systems as more ambiguous than fixed, Elliott distinguishes herself from other turn-of-the-century local colorists and creates a more accurate picture of late nineteenth-century Appalachia’s complex economy.

On a larger level, Elliott’s novel affirms the need for nuanced class analysis in regionalist scholarship while simultaneously encouraging readers to move away from using fixed spatial designations to designate class status. *The Durket Sperret* shows that all spaces resonate with class ambiguity. When Hannah first meets Agnes Welling, the university resident sees traces of good breeding in the Covite and allows her to leave through the front door, an exit that Mrs. Wilson “had declared was sealed to traders” (17). Lizer Wilson later tells Hannah about the front door’s significance: “these fine folks don’t ax folks like weuns in the front do’; weuns ain’t nothin’ but ‘Covites come to peddle” (12). Mrs. Wilson mistakenly sees the door as a fixed space, capable of delineating one’s class status. Hannah’s movement shows more flexibility in class assignation; she is both of a genteel nature (in Agnes’s eyes) and of a lower class (in Lizer’s eyes) as she moves through this door. Elliott masterfully reveals the problem of using fixed physical spaces to indicate something as unstable as class. Readers cannot divine Hannah’s class position from her relationship with the door just as they cannot presume that characters are universally impoverished or in specific economic positions because of their connection to Appalachia. The notion that spatial affiliation cannot identify class status becomes even more resonant for today’s increasingly global, fast-paced society. Elliott’s work anticipates the needs of today’s increasingly mobile readers who might associate with many communities and so cannot be defined (economically or otherwise) through a single spatial affiliation.

Through the novel's depiction of class as a system of relativity, Elliott also inserts Appalachia into conversations about a global market in which economies are interdependent. It is significant that Elliott's publishers released *The Durket Sperret* along with her short story, "An Idle Man," as a companion piece to lengthen the volume. This story, likely inspired by Elliott's 1886 trip to Israel with her brother, describes a wealthy gentleman who travels the globe, seemingly without purpose. A young woman lambasts the gentleman for his lifestyle, only to find out that he travels to perform acts of great philanthropy. The idle man's use of wealth and leisure for altruistic purposes mirrors Agnes's desire to use her education and free time to reform Hannah. Although Agnes fails where the gentleman of Elliott's story succeeds, the similarities help readers see how the economic concerns of Appalachians are not so different from those of other worldly citizens.

Through its representation of these power dynamics, *The Durket Sperret* asserts Appalachia's participation in the same economic issues shaping the US at large, challenging the region's supposed immunity to industrialization and class conflict. Elliott's novel lays the groundwork for later scholars who seek to understand the region's economic nuances and who strive to refute theories about the Mountaineer's "culture of poverty."<sup>4</sup> *The Durket Sperret* affirms this scholarship by showing that, in reality, the region has always had an economic system and class categories that resist generalizations about monolithic poverty. Because the complexity of local economies mirrors that of larger national economies, scholars cannot isolate Appalachian class systems from the rest of the world, nor can the greater society assume superior economic development to smaller cultural enclaves.

---

<sup>4</sup>According to the "culture of poverty" theory that sociologists have posed to explain the region's economy, Appalachia's destitution stems from a culture with little incentive to seek a better quality of life. It is "a society trapped in its own cultural apparatus—barred from the class mobility of industrial capitalism by a cyclical reproduction of antiquated cultural traits" (Billings and Blee 161).

## Works Cited

- Allen, James Lane. "Through Cumberland Gap on Horseback." *Harper's Monthly* 73 (1886): 50-66. Rpt. in *Seekers of Scenery: Travel Writing from Southern Appalachia, 1840-1900*. Ed. Kevin E. O'Donnell and Helen Hollingsworth. Knoxville: U of Tennessee P, 2004. 249-74.
- Aron, Cindy S. "The Evolution of the Middle Class." *A Companion to 19th-Century America*. Ed. William L. Barney. Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2001. 178-94.
- "Article 7." *Life* 21 Apr. 1898: 338.
- Ballard, Sandra L., and Patricia L. Hudson, eds. "Sarah Barnwell Elliott." *Listen Here: Women Writing in Appalachia*. Lexington: UP of Kentucky, 2003. 208-09.
- Billings, Dwight B., and Kathleen M. Blee. *The Road to Poverty: The Making of Wealth and Hardship in Appalachia*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2000.
- Caudill, Harry M. *Night Comes to the Cumberlands: A Biography of a Depressed Area*. Boston: Little, Brown, 1963.
- Dainotto, Roberto M. *Place in Literature: Regions, Cultures, Communities*. Ithaca: Cornell UP, 2000.
- Drake, Richard B. *A History of Appalachia*. Lexington: U of Kentucky P, 2001.
- "The Durket Family Pride." *Overland Monthly* 31.186 (1898): 576.
- Eller, Ronald D. *Miners, Millhands, and Mountaineers: Industrialization of the Appalachian South, 1880-1930*. Knoxville: U of Tennessee P, 1982.
- Elliott, Sarah Barnwell. "Comment." *Book News* 16.191 (July 1898): 657.
- . *The Durket Sperret*. 1898. Gloucestershire: Dodo, 2010.
- . "Faith and Faithfulness." *Harper's Monthly* 93 (1896): 791-97.
- . "A Florentine Idyl." *Independent* 40 (1888): 26-29.
- . "Fortune's Vassals." *Lippincott's Magazine* 64 (1899): 163-253.
- . *Jerry*. New York: Henry Holt & Co., 1891.
- . *John Paget*. New York: Henry Holt & Co., 1893.
- . Letter to R. Habersham Elliott. 28 Apr. 1871. MS. Elliott Family Papers. University Archives and Special Collections, The University of the South, Sewanee, TN.
- . *The Making of Jane*. New York: C. Scribner's Sons, 1901.
- . "A Race That Lives in Mountain Coves." *Ladies' Home Journal* 15 (1898): 11-12.

- Ensor, Allison. "Sarah Barnwell Elliott." *Southern Writers: A New Biographical Dictionary*. Ed. Joseph M. Flora, Amber Vogel, and Bryan A. Giemza. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State UP, 2006. 124-25.
- Foote, Stephanie. "The Cultural Work of American Regionalism." *A Companion to the Regional Literatures of America*. Ed. Charles L. Crow. Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2003. 25-41.
- Foster, Travis M. "How to Read: Regionalism and *The Ladies' Home Journal*." *The Oxford Handbook of Nineteenth-Century Literature*. Ed. Russ Castronovo. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2012. 291-308.
- Kunitz, Stanley. *American Authors, 1600-1900*. Bronx: H. W. Wilson, 1938. 251.
- Lang, Amy Schrager. *The Syntax of Class: Writing Inequality in Nineteenth-Century America*. Princeton: Princeton UP, 2003.
- Mackenzie, Clara Childs. Introduction. *Some Data and Other Stories of Southern Life*. By Sarah Barnwell Elliott. Ed. Clara Childs Mackenzie. Bratenahl, OH: Seaforth, 1981. vii-xiii.
- . *Sarah Barnwell Elliott*. Boston: Twayne, 1980.
- Miles, Emma Bell. "Some Real American Music." *Harper's Monthly Magazine* 109 (1904): 118-23.
- Moses, Montrose J. "Literary Life in the Tennessee Mountains." *The Bookman: A Review of Books and Life* Sep. 1912: 47-52.
- Palmer, Stephanie C. *Together by Accident: American Local Color Literature and the Middle Class*. New York: Lexington, 2009.
- "Personalialia." *The Literary World: A Monthly Review of Current Literature* 2 Dec. 1897: 458.
- "Review of *The Durket Sperret*." *The Nation* 19 May 1899: 389.
- Shapiro, Henry D. *Appalachia on Our Mind: The Southern Mountains and Mountaineers in the American Consciousness, 1870-1920*. Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 1978.
- Smith, John Abernathy. "Franklin County." *The Tennessee Encyclopedia of History and Culture*. Vers. 2. Tennessee Historical Society, 1998. Web. 10 July 2013.
- Storey, Mark. *Rural Fictions, Urban Realities: A Geography of Gilded Age American Literature*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2013.
- Veblen, Thorstein. *The Theory of the Leisure Class*. Project Gutenberg. 8 Aug. 2008. Web. 3 Nov. 2013.
- Williams, Cratis D. "Appalachia in Fiction." *Appalachian Heritage* 4.4 (1976): 44-56.

Willingham, Robert M. "Sarah Barnwell Elliott." *Southern Writers: A Biographical Dictionary*. Eds. Robert Bain, Joseph M. Flora, and Louis D. Rubin. Louisiana: Louisiana State UP, 1979. 143-44.

